



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

# Gender roles related to work burden and child labour in agriculture in Punjab



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This policy brief presents the findings from a study conducted by the Punjab Economic Research Institute (PERI), with the support of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The objective is to analyse the causal relationship between gender roles and vulnerabilities, with a focus on women's work burden, and their effects on child labour in agriculture in district Multan, Bahawalpur and Vehari of Pakistan's Punjab Province. The findings informed the design for the FAO component under the European Union funded CLEAR Cotton project. FAO's intervention centred on strengthening livelihoods of cotton-producing households, through the provision of technical and life skills trainings for beneficiaries, to foster investments in children's education.

Data was collected through focus group discussions, key informant interviews ( KII ) and household interviews in cotton-growing communities. Most of the surveyed households consisted of landless farmers, tenants or sharecroppers, mainly growing wheat and cotton.

In the surveyed communities, 69.1 percent of women reported their primary occupation to be household work (which also includes agricultural work for home consumption such as tending for small ruminants) and 24.3 percent reported agricultural labour as their second occupation. On the other hand, 28.7 percent of surveyed men indicated they were farmers and 36 percent mentioned agricultural labour as their main occupation. Even if many women did not indicate agricultural labour as their main occupation, they reported being engaged in several agriculture related tasks such as sowing, hoeing and thinning crops. During planting and harvesting seasons, the demand for labour increases and women commonly work from 8 to 10 hours per day in the field on top of the 4 to 5 hours per day they need to perform their households related tasks. This PERI/FAO study shows that children work alongside adults as agriculture labourer, which limits their ability to attend and benefit from schooling. In the surveyed communities, children work alongside adults in their family farms or as agricultural labourer, make up an important part of the workforce, especially those of sharecroppers.

## Primary data

- Interviews were conducted in 11 tehsils ("townships") in three districts including Multan, Vehari and Bahawalpur of Punjab.
- A total of 222 interviews were conducted – 77 FGDs, 33 KIIs and 112 structured household interviews.
- Among the 112 households surveyed, 101 were male-headed and 11 were female-headed.
- The households comprised a total of 733 people (48.3 percent male, 51.7 percent female), with age ranging from less than 5 years to 83 years.
- Children (less than 18 years) accounted for 41.9 percent of household members.
- About 32.2 percent children aged 5-17 years were illiterate, while the corresponding figure for age group of 17 and above was 96.2 percent.



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### Farming and production practices and gender system in rural Punjab

Historically, the agricultural policies of Pakistan focused mostly on the needs and benefits of large landowners. In the last two decades, the attention shifted to medium- and small-scale farmers with measures to provide them with better access to credit, subsidies, technology as well as to advisory and training services.

One of the most used legal arrangements for smallholder in Pakistan is sharecropping, where a landowner contributes in the shape of providing land for farming while the tenant provides required labour to accomplish all farm operations. Under the conventional sharecropping and land tenant system, the cost and benefits of production are meant to be shared equally. However, sharecroppers are vulnerable due to the risks associated to farming.

Sharecroppers and smallholder farmers use their family members as a resource to minimise costs. This traps them in a vicious cycle of subsistence oriented farming, low yields, and insufficient profits, preventing them from making beneficial investments.

Families also practice labour exchange, sharing the work in each other's fields. Such an informal arrangement means that they can't be protected through any security or benefits, such as health insurance, or by any contribution-based social insurance scheme, nor by tax-financed social benefits.

Evidence has shown that women and older children (15–17 years) belonging to the landless category are an important farming resource even though their work is assimilated to their households responsibilities, yielding no economic benefits nor formal recognition. This is because the produce of the sharecropper and smallholder farms is usually registered in the name of the head of household (men). Such informality can affect the rights of women and children, and also conceal hazardous work.

Table 1 shows that most of the tasks carried out by women, are essential for the well-being and livelihoods of rural households and yet they are not defined as economic activity in the national accounts. It often leaves women without any cover by labour laws or social benefits like pension health insurance or paid sick leave.

**Table 1: Type of task by gender**

Tasks	Women	Men
Fertilizing	Yes *	Yes**
Harvesting	Yes (main)	Yes
Hoeing	Yes (main)	Yes
Household work	Yes (main)	Yes
Irrigation	No	Yes
Land Preparation	Yes	Yes (main)
Marketing	No	Yes
Picking	Yes	No
Sowing	Yes (main)	Yes
Spraying	No	Yes
Thinning	Yes (main)	Yes
Weeding	Yes	Yes
*Exclusively use natural and organic fertilizers		
** Exclusively use of agrochemicals		

Source: FAO and PERI. (Forthcoming). A study on gender roles, related work burden and their effects on child labour in agriculture in Punjab, Rome.

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Gender roles also affect rural households decision-making.<sup>1</sup> In rural Punjab, men decide over the use, purchase and selling of assets and property, which crops to sow and which livestock to raise, or if a business should be started.



Women only take a few intra households decisions regarding children's education and nutrition but they tend not to have access to the latest agricultural information and knowledge or health and safety practices, which could increase their productivity.

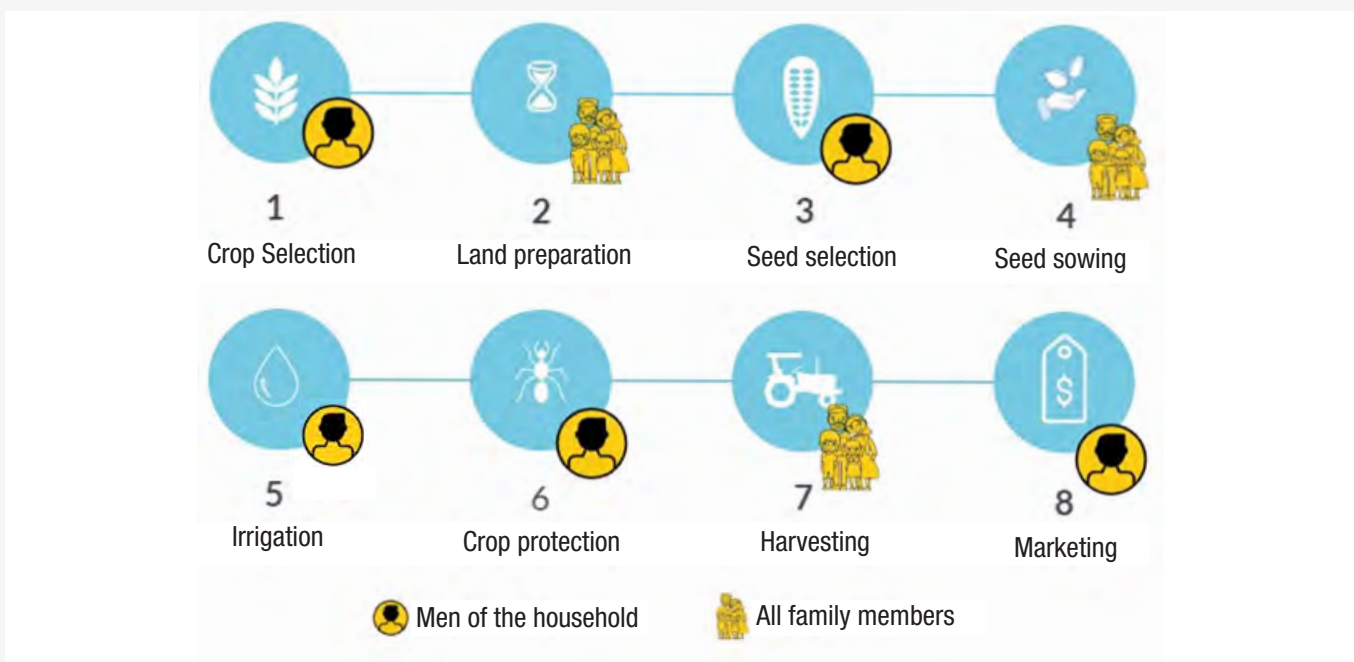
Small animal rearing and crops are part of a single, integrated farming system. Farmers need to ensure their survival in the face of risks associated with crop farming by resources generated through livestock rearing. Moreover, milk and milk products are the primary sources of protein in the diet of these rural households. The output of the field, i.e. crops, belong to the male domain, because it can be commercialized as a result of men's access to markets. In rural Punjab, women are mainly responsible for raising small livestock, in the same way that men are the main responsible for raising crops. Even if women weed crops, this task is considered or perceived to fit within the small livestock sector as weeds are used to feed to animals. This divides the households into a commercial sector (crop farming) that is apparent and a subsistence sector that is invisible (small livestock).

For many women, access to service and training opportunities and to income-generating opportunities outside this farming production system is limited because of prevailing social norms that tend to restrict their decision-making powers, mobility and independent access to resources. Women's skills gap is still a major barrier to diversifying their roles in agriculture value chains and encouraging their engagement in income-generating activities.

Men do not participate in households work whereas women's engagement in diverse income-generating opportunities is limited in the given gender system.

Figure 1 summarises how men, women and households members are engaged in crop production. While men handle the economic side on their own, women support most other farming tasks. This distribution of labour is influenced by the extreme poverty of the households. Limited mechanization and the inability to pay for additional farm hands tend to increase the work burden of households members. Unlike men, women and other households members – children included – have to simultaneously farm and carry out households work.

**Figure1: Gender roles across agriculture stages**



1. The gender system of a society consists of norms, behaviours, standards and attitudes that support the meaning associated with being male and female, including their responsibilities and rights in accordance with their ages and social standing (Mason, 2001).

### Gender division of labour, time use and work burden

In the surveyed communities, 69.1 percent of women reported their primary occupation as being households work (which includes tending for small ruminants) and 24.3 percent reported agricultural labour as their second occupation. On the other side, 28.7 percent of surveyed men indicated they were farmers and another 36 percent mentioned agricultural labour as their main occupation.

Households work is described as cooking, washing clothes, water collection, dishwashing, cleaning and taking care of children. However, tasks related to food security and households consumption also tend to be assimilated with households work. Interviews pointed to the fact that women look after the vegetables they grow for households consumption. They manage the households livestock and poultry including feeding, cleaning sheds, fodder collection from the fields, milking and collecting produce such as milk and eggs.

Women's households work and related responsibilities reduce their opportunities for paid employment. Very few women were engaged in work other than the one mentioned above. Although women did not indicate farming as their main occupation, they reported key tasks such as hoeing, sowing (cotton and rice), weeding and thinning of crops, harvesting wheat, maize, chilli and cleaning harvested grain and straw as handled primarily by them.

Men are engaged in agriculture activities that involve the use of machinery, such as ploughing, ridge formation, harvesting (except in cotton crop, which is done by hand, by women), irrigation and spraying pesticides and herbicides. Women's tasks, on the other hand, are manual. For example, women do cotton picking by hand. They also manage the production and use of organic fertilizers, while men are trained and responsible for the application of chemical fertilizers.

The repartition of tasks and time distribution among men and women at the households and field levels, together with extreme poverty have a considerable impact on child labour. Seed planting, sowing of cotton, rice and maize, and harvesting (cotton, wheat, rice, maize, red chilli etc.) are time and energy consuming for women, who on the side have a workload of up to 5 hours per day associated with their regular family and households care (including caring for the households livestock). By comparison, men spend 14–16 hours a day on agriculture related tasks during harvest and 6–8 hours a day at other times. If they are free from agricultural tasks at farm level, they commonly “help” with caring for family livestock and with collecting firewood. When other members of their households can carry out less demanding tasks, i.e. outside planting and harvesting seasons, men find daily wage work opportunities outside their households and farms in other farms or sectors, for example in local brick kilns.

What particularly characterizes women's tasks in contrast to those of men is that their tasks are carried out simultaneously and not sequentially as men do. Women's work burden peaks during planting and harvesting seasons, when demand for agricultural labour is the highest. During these periods, they commonly work 8–10 hours a day in the fields, compared with 4–5 hours a day at other times of the production cycle. And often, they ask their children, both girls and boys, to help out.

### Child labour and communities' perception about children's work in rural Punjab

Child labour is defined as work that is inappropriate for a child's age, affects a child's education or is likely to harm their health, safety or morals (ILO, 2022). Not all work carried out by children is considered child labour. Age appropriate tasks that are not hazardous and do not interfere with a child's education can be positive as they can contribute to the inter generational transfer of skills and children's food security.

Children are an important part of the workforce in smallholder farms in Punjab, especially those of sharecroppers. Children commonly work alongside adult members from their households, whether on their own fields or as agricultural labourer.

As in most agricultural communities, people work on the farm for the subsistence income of their households. The

income earned in one season has to last until the income from the next season is available.

The support of households members is used as a resource in pre-harvest and during crop growth. Men, women and children contribute as per their time throughout the crop time (until maturity) and harvesting. As fields of cotton and wheat have to be harvested, the men, women and children (15–17 years) work together to harvest the crop.

Girls start helping their mothers with the family and households related tasks at an early age, especially during harvest time. Girls (5–14 years) carry out light family and households related tasks<sup>2</sup> and girls (15–17 years) carry out farm related tasks such as planting seeds, thinning crops, weeding and caring for livestock. Boys remain with their mothers until about 8 years of age and help them with the households related tasks.

At about the age of 8 years, boys start accompanying their fathers to the fields to help them with agricultural work. Boys of age 5–11 years help in tasks such as cutting and collecting fodder and feeding livestock, while boys of age 12–14 years help with harvesting, hoeing, weeding and land preparation. Boys of age 15–17 years operate farm machinery such as threshers, tractors, and sprayers. In this case age range, boys are also engaged in the marketing of farm produce.

Children (15–17 years), both girls and boys, commonly work in the field for 5–6 hours a day during harvest time and for 3–4 hours a day at other times of the year. This limits their ability to attend and benefit from school. Girls (15–17 years) commonly work for 3–5 hours a day within the households, compared with 1–2 hours a day for boys (15–17 years). Most of this work carried out by the children is unpaid, either on their farms or as support for an adult family member who is formally employed on others' farms.

Table 2 depicts the average daily time distribution by agricultural and households tasks. The girls of age 5–11 years, on average, spend about 0.7 hours daily on agricultural tasks and 1.4 hours on households tasks. The girls of age 12–14 years, on average, spend 1.7 hours daily on agricultural tasks and 3.5 hours on households tasks. The girls of age 15–17 years, on average, spend 2.4 hours daily on agricultural tasks and 3.4 hours on households tasks. The boys of age 5–11 years, on average, spend about 0.9 hours daily on agricultural tasks and 0.6 hours on households tasks. The boys of age 12–14 years, on average, spend 1.9 hours daily on agricultural tasks and 0.7 hours on households tasks. The boys of age 15–17 years, on average, spend 2.9 hours daily on agricultural tasks and 0.6 hours on households tasks.

**Table 2: Average time distribution of work for girls & boys (hours per day)**

Type of work	Girls (age cohorts years)			Boys (age cohorts years)		
	5–11	12–14	15–17	5–11	12–14	15–17
<b>Agricultural labour (hours)</b>	0.79	1.70	2.40	0.90	1.90	2.90
<b>Household work (hours)</b>	1.40	3.50	3.40	0.60	0.70	0.60

Source: FAO and PERI. (Forthcoming). A study on gender roles, related work burden and their effects on child labour in agriculture in Punjab. Rome.

The study noted that the majority of the paid work in the study areas was carried out without any written agreement. Despite existing regulations, informality prevails, and written contracts are not signed when hiring labour for agriculture tasks.

In this informal setting, children contribute to the work performed by their employed family members but they are not formally employed themselves. The girls aged 5–11 years in these cases, were mainly working in others' farms (cotton picking), similar was the case for girls of age 12–14 years and 15–17 years but for longer hours. Boys of age 5–11 years were all working in others' farms, the boys of age 12–14 years were working as daily wage workers in another sector.

The agricultural tasks carried out on others' farms are not paid as they are just viewed as complementary support to the tasks performed by the paid adult family member.

2. The households related task are including taking care of younger siblings, washing dishes and clothes, knead flour and pick vegetables. Households and family related tasks performed by 5–11 years girls spend 1 to 2 hours and 5–11 years boys spend 0 to 1 hour per day.

The number of hours worked and remuneration per hour was relatively higher for boy respondents. Boys were working 72.49 hours per month and their average salary per hour was PKR 93.28.<sup>3</sup> Girls were working 49.96 hours per month and their remuneration was PKR 74.41 per hour.<sup>4</sup>

Gender division of tasks starts to appear better defined when considering the task repartition among boys and girls in the 12–17 years age group. Girls of 12–17 years, carry out the kind of tasks that women are expected to carry out at the farm. Boys in this same age group start using the tractor, spraying of pesticides and watering crops like their fathers. The girls are also required to cook food and generally look after households work related tasks as their mothers are away on the field. These children are facing extreme fatigue, workplace injury, illness and poor health issues and many boys face physical violence.

The involvement of children of age 5–11 years, especially during wheat and cotton harvest which coincides with their need to attend school (if there is a school in the village) is an issue of concern. However, the whole community, including teachers, commonly engage in agricultural tasks during labour peak seasons, meaning that the schools are often (unofficially) closed during the harvesting periods.

Between 50 percent and 70 percent of children attended primary school in the three districts, with little difference between girls and boys. Attendance at lower secondary school was much lower, ranging from 26 percent to 36.5 percent among boys, with little difference between girls and boys.

Attendance at upper secondary school was lower, ranging from 18.5 percent to 27.4 percent among boys and from 22.7 percent to 33.9 percent among girls, with the attendance of girls being higher in all three districts. The lower attendance at secondary school is largely due to the absence of secondary schools at the village level (particularly for male children) and the lack of funds to pay for schooling or transport to the nearest available school (particularly for female children). The cost was the major reason cited for children of both sexes dropping out of school.

Table 3 depicted that women tended to consider education more important for both girls and boys than did men. Overall, a little bit less than half of respondents thought that children should work and earn money for the family rather than going to school.

**Table 3: Perceptions about the importance of child education and households division of labour**

Perception	Male (%)	Female (%)	Overall (%)
Children should work/earn instead of going to school	42.4	45.8	44.8
Education is necessary for a boy	93.9	98.6	97.1
Education is necessary for a girl	87.9	97.2	94.3
Daughters should work for income	72.7	79.2	77.1
Boys should perform households work - related tasks	90.9	80.6	83.8
Education makes children better individuals	90.9	97.2	95.2
Men should help women and perform households work - related tasks	84.8	88.9	87.6

Source: FAO and PERI. (Forthcoming). A study on gender roles, related work burden and their effects on child labour in agriculture in Punjab. Rome.

3. About USD 0.58 at the conversion rate of PKR 160 =USD1 at time of data collection (Nov 2020).

4. About USD 0.46 at the conversion rate of PKR 160 =USD1 at time of data collection (Nov 2020).



The study also showed that 90 percent of adult respondents stated that boys of age 12–14 years should attend school, compared with 84 percent for girls of the same age. The consideration of the importance of education drops drastically for older children (15–17 years), at only 60 percent for boys and 54 percent for girls. This is in part due to a lack of employment opportunities for those with secondary or higher education in rural areas.





### Recommendations

Sharecroppers and smallholder farmers use their family work as a resource to minimise costs and increase profits for the whole households. In times of need, families also practice labour exchange by sharing the workload in each other's fields. Combined with households work related tasks, this brings additional work burden for women, especially during labour intensive stages of the crop value chain such as harvesting season. The fact that parents struggle with time availability also affects children, who are drawn into the workforce.

Policymakers may consider the following to balance these roles in rural Punjab. There is need to address some of the key gender based constraints and their impact on child labour in these rural communities, policies and strategies. This would require strengthening parenting and community education initiatives to address harmful practices and social norms that perpetuate child labour, while collaborating with national and local governments to prevent exploitation and abuse. National and provincial policies and strategies need to support increased access to quality education and provide comprehensive services to keep children educated, informed and protected. Smallholders, including tenant farmers and sharecroppers, require special attention from policymakers for improved rural extension and advisory services, farmer training, resources, information, and organised platforms for voicing their needs. Public policies (rural poverty reduction, agriculture and rural development) need to recognise women's role in small-scale farming and the impact of their economic empowerment on the drivers of child labour.

In particular:

#### **1. Make women agriculture workers visible in labour and agriculture policies**

Regardless of women's contribution to the agricultural labour force, the Government of Punjab has not yet formally recognized the role of women agriculture workers and therefore they still do not benefit from legal protection. Agricultural policy, extension advisory services, training activities and education strategies should recognize the central role of women in small-scale agriculture and should be more inclusive. For example, extension advisory services and training activities should be offered to the entire households, rather than only to the males.

#### **2. Build rural women's capacities for increased participation**

Agriculture policies should be reviewed with a gender lens to engage more women in agriculture extension services, input supply, and access to finance, among others. There is a need to build rural women's capacities for increased participation across the crop value chain. The public and private sectors should offer tailor-made financial products for rural women. School curricula should include more content on good agricultural practices for small-scale farming. More women should be employed by agro dealer shops to encourage women farmers to visit the shop for crop related transactions.

#### **3. Create women farmer cooperatives and associations**

Enabling women to organize themselves will help in building social cohesion in rural communities and empowering women to invest in small businesses. The public and private sectors should support the establishment and strengthening of organized farmer groups, such as cooperatives and associations to streamline women's participation.

#### **4. Equip women with better skills for income opportunities**

Gaps in women's skills are recognised as a major barrier to diversifying their roles and undertaking income-

generating activities. In the study area, it was found that government does not offer training opportunities to women on any of the tasks that women are commonly engaged in. There are no government initiatives to enhance income-generating skills for women working on these small-scale farms. Resultantly when demands for paid skilled agriculture labour are high men are preferred over the women, due to their skills and knowledge.

### **5. Promote small enterprises for rural women**

Livestock and crops are part of a single, integrated livelihood system. Milk and milk products are the primary sources of protein in the diet of a small farming households. Data suggest that women manage vegetables, livestock and poultry for households consumption. This includes feeding and milking animals, cleaning sheds, collecting fodder, among other tasks. Households and family responsibilities of women reduce their opportunities for paid employment. Their services are crucial for household's food security but are seldom counted in the formal economy. There is a need to promote small livestock and horticulture enterprises for rural women.

### **6. Harmonize child labour and legal frameworks promoting education**

The Punjab Restriction on Employment of Children (PREC) Act 2016 (Pakistan, 2016) provides that no child should be employed in any sort of work and no adolescent (child aged 15–17 years) should be employed in any work that is hazardous or dangerous. It regulates the duration of work allowed to a child aged 15–17 years old. The law stresses the importance that hours of work of a child (15–17 years) should be arranged in such a manner that the working hours are not in conflict with the timings of the educational or vocational institution where the adolescent is enrolled. The PREC Act (2016) emphasizes the importance of linking the age of school completion with the minimum age to work or employment. The Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Ordinance 2014 affirms through the Article 25A of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan presents that the state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years and for the purpose, it is expedient to make necessary provisions. Conflicting policies and legal definitions of minimum age to work (15 years) and age of compulsory education (5–16 years), encourage children to leave school before completing their education.

### **7. Promote rural education programs**

Government and private organizations should pay special attention and invest in rural education programs, especially for girls. Educational curricula should be revised to include more agriculture related content to make them more relevant to smallscale agricultural households and contribute to the future development of the agricultural sector. This should be linked with the promotion of agriculture as a field of study in higher education.

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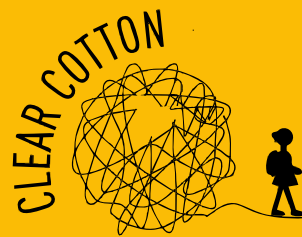
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